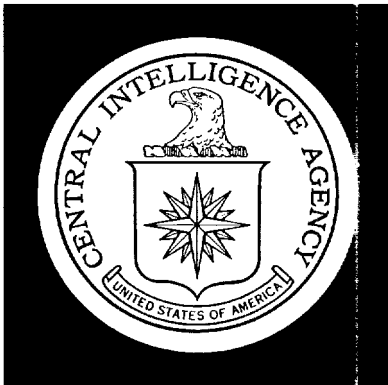


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OFFICE OF  
NATIONAL ESTIMATES

*See note  
attached*

## MEMORANDUM

*Major Communist Military Action in the Offing:  
The Case for Cambodia*

**Secret**

29 October 1970

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# CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

## OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

29 October 1970

### MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Major Communist Military Action in the Offing:  
The Case for Cambodia

### INTRODUCTORY NOTE

The 1968 Tet offensive came at a time when most of the major indicators for 1967 -- communist loss rates, the state of Communist morale, ARVN performance, GVN control in the countryside -- had shown steady progress for the Allied side. It was possible in the fall of 1967 to believe that the communists had lost the initiative for good and speculation was rife as to how and when, in the months ahead, the communists might seek through political and diplomatic means to salvage their position. To the surprise of many, the communists reacted with what can only be judged as a fairly high risk general military offensive. The nature of the risk can best be appreciated if one recalls that Tet very nearly was not a surprise; it could have been a

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clear military disaster for the communists if a bit more warning had reached ARVN and MACV. The psychological impact on the communists in this event would have been most severe.

The parallels between the fall of 1967 and the present are not too close. Nonetheless, there is this to be said: communist prospects, by any objective measurement we can make, are worse than pre-Tet 1968 and in an apparent state of decline. Once again we do not see clearly what they intend to do about it. In general, however, we tend to believe that they will eschew major and risky military campaigns while waiting for the US to move further along the road of withdrawal.

This paper is not written to upset the prevailing judgment. It does, however, advance another hypothesis which takes account of Hanoi's willingness to take risks, from time to time, when and if it believes such action is required by the general situation. In this case, we are talking about the possibility of large-scale military action in Cambodia to the end of toppling the Lon Nol regime and as in Tet 1968, producing a major psychological and political effect on Allied will and determination in Indochina.

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The paper is intended to make an argument, not to reach a conclusion. For this reason, no attempt has been made to get general agreement within CIA on its content, but its substance has been intensively discussed within the Agency.

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I. THE CASE FOR CAMBODIA

1. Whatever the communists might have been planning for the winter of 1970-71, developments in Cambodia certainly forced a change. Sanctuaries were lost, base areas overrun, and large quantities of supplies captured. Sihanoukville was lost as a supply route, and communist forces in Laos and South Vietnam were diverted to the new theater of operations. In the wake of Cambodian developments, then, Hanoi probably found itself faced with the necessity of significantly modifying its plan of action. Certainly, Cambodia changed Hanoi's view of the requirements of its military situation; security of the logistics system became a more critical problem; forces had to be spun off to Cambodia; and there was the problem of heading off the possible development of an effective Cambodian army. In short, there were new dimensions and problems in supporting the war in South Vietnam -- the priority strategic target.

2. Thus far the communists have eschewed large-scale action in Cambodia. But it should be stressed that the ouster of Sihanouk caught them unaware; they were not prepared for major action. Even so, the limited resources committed by the communists in late

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March and early April appeared to be enough to topple the new Lon Nol government. But on 30 April the task at hand changed as allied forces stormed into Cambodia. Survival was the first order of business, and more than ever before it became critically necessary to expand the communist logistics net in southern Laos and northeastern Cambodia. At the same time, bent on weakening Lon Nol's hostile regime, Hanoi was faced with the necessity of building -- almost from scratch -- a Khmer "resistance" movement.

3. There is no solid evidence of Hanoi's plans regarding Cambodia. Thus far, the communists have gained control of about half the country with the commitment of only modest resources. This appears sufficient for their immediate priority logistical needs and provides a relatively secure area for future operations. As a result, they may not plan any substantial change in their operations in Cambodia. On the other hand, having evaluated the situation, they may have decided to undertake a major effort in Cambodia to bring down the present government -- either directly by assaulting Phnom Penh or (probably preferable from Hanoi's perspective) indirectly by causing the regime's collapse and its replacement by a government willing to accommodate the

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communists. In short, developments in Cambodia probably have made major military action in South Vietnam less likely, but Cambodia itself might now be viewed in Hanoi as a high-priority and potentially rewarding alternative target.

4. Cons. In weighing the advisability of a major military push in Cambodia, Hanoi would see numerous risks and difficulties. Obviously, success would not be assured, and the attempt could be costly in men and materiel. It is possible, moreover, that Hanoi calculates that a determined effort to bring down the Lon Nol regime would exceed communist capabilities. While the Cambodian army has not shown itself to be overly aggressive, it has fought relatively well in the defense of fixed positions and could be expected to fight with even greater determination to defend the capital. More important, Hanoi would have to calculate that the South Vietnamese would intervene quickly and with sizable forces should a large Cambodian force be on the brink of defeat or Phnom Penh in danger of falling.\*

\* Hanoi might not look upon the anticipated ARVN involvement in Cambodia as a completely negative factor. At a minimum, it would pull ARVN away from the South Vietnamese theater and might make communist operations there easier. The communists might also calculate that chances of inflicting a significant defeat on South Vietnamese forces would be greater in Cambodia than in South Vietnam. Even if ARVN performed relatively well in Cambodia (in a military sense), the communist leadership might expect a marked increase in Khmer animosity toward the South Vietnamese as a result of ARVN depredations while in action around towns and cities. As a result, Hanoi might see an increased opportunity to build a viable Khmer resistance movement.

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5. Hanoi's leaders also cannot afford to ignore the possibility that the US would again intervene on the ground in Cambodia should it appear necessary to save the situation. At a minimum, Hanoi would anticipate sharply stepped-up US air attacks on its forces in Cambodia. Hanoi would almost certainly be fearful too that major action in Cambodia might lead the US to slow or even to postpone its troop withdrawals from South Vietnam. In short, Hanoi may fear that by increasing the scale of fighting in Cambodia, the communists would be risking a major defeat in the field and jeopardizing their objectives in South Vietnam as well.

6. A major effort to bring down Lon Nol might also tie down more communist resources in Cambodia than Hanoi would want to commit. Although communist combat forces already diverted to Cambodian operations are not large -- 10,000-20,000 -- these diversions have already reduced the immediate threat to South Vietnam. Further, the communists seem acutely sensitive to the possibility that allied action might be undertaken against their LOCs in southern Laos and northeastern Cambodia. The increased personnel allocated to the logistical system in these areas has already required manpower that could have been

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used in South Vietnam. Much more of this might jeopardize continuation of the communist effort in South Vietnam. As a result, Hanoi may believe that there is a danger of becoming bogged down in Cambodia and that it has its hands full merely in defending, or preparing to defend, against possible future allied moves. In sum, Hanoi may not see itself in a position to undertake the necessary preparations for major offensive action in Cambodia.

7. Even if successful in bringing down the Lon Nol regime or in gaining substantially more real estate in Cambodia, the communists must estimate that use of Sihanoukville and unmolested sanctuary in eastern Cambodia are things of the past. So far as the GVN is concerned, the restraints of the past are gone forever; at a minimum, Hanoi would expect US bombing of Cambodia to continue, regardless of what flag flew over Phnom Penh. Indeed, Hanoi may reason that communist success in Cambodia would only increase the possibility that US/GVN forces would strike back on the ground against the trail system in southern Laos to negate any communist gains in Cambodia.\*

\* Another argument against a communist offensive in Cambodia, is that if the communists took over in Phnom Penh they would have to assume responsibility for administering the country, thereby tying down administrative and security personnel in static positions. Though there is validity to this argument, the communists may believe that once they gained control at the center, they would be able to utilize most of the present administrative structure with a relatively small number of communist overseers. And if Lon Nol were ousted by Cambodian elements, even fewer demands might be placed on communist administrative and security personnel.

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8. Pros. Hanoi may see major gains to be made in a successful military venture in Cambodia. First and foremost, if Lon Nol were ousted, by whatever route, Hanoi might expect this to be interpreted as a major defeat of US policy in Indochina. If so, Hanoi would probably expect a resurgence of anti-war and pro-negotiation sentiment in the US.\* With national elections coming up in South Vietnam in late 1971, the communists also would be likely to anticipate an increase in peace sentiment there as well. At the outside, Hanoi may calculate that communist success in Cambodia would set the stage for a major challenge or defeat of Thieu by a "peace" candidate, or perhaps more likely, that Thieu would feel compelled to move brutally to stifle the tide of peace sentiment, creating a more favorable long-term atmosphere for anti-government activity in Saigon.

\* Even if the communists were not greatly successful in Cambodia, they might still expect to achieve some psychological gains. Indeed, if US ground forces were again utilized in Cambodia, or if US withdrawals from South Vietnam were suspended as a result of communist attacks, Hanoi might foresee the revival of major anti-war pressures in the US.

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9. Hanoi may be prepared to take larger risks than we have anticipated to realize the potential gains of a "Cambodian success," if its confidence in longer term communist prospects has declined. And there is some evidence that confidence has, indeed, been adversely affected by trends in South Vietnam and by events in Cambodia. Communist documents and statements by defectors, prisoners, and clandestine sources reflect considerable doubt about the abilities and staying power of the communist apparatus.\* By all accounts, the morale of communist troops and cadres leaves a lot to be desired. Vietnamization is proceeding apace and with little challenge, the pacification effort is still on the track, and ARVN is beginning to show signs of becoming a relatively effective fighting force.

\* For about two years, this has been a common theme in high level communist statements and in captured documents, notably COSVN Resolution 9 of July 1969. These documents and statements seemed to call for a more measured military approach while the communists set about repairing shortcomings, particularly in the political and organizational fields. The thrust of most of the evidence was that the communists had postponed for a considerable time the possibility of undertaking another round of major large-scale offensive action. Communist actions since at least the spring of 1969 have generally followed this low profile approach, although there were a few documents and reports -- most dated prior to the Cambodian imbroglio -- which suggested that major offensive action was planned for the latter part of 1970 or early 1971.

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10. Developments in Cambodia heightened communist apprehensions about their long term staying power and probably increased the pressures on them to do something to recoup the situation. The availability of sanctuary and bases in Cambodia almost certainly were an integral part of Hanoi's strategy for prolonging the struggle, indefinitely if necessary, in Indochina until the US had withdrawn from the war. But the allied move into Cambodia undercut such calculations. Not only had the communists been set back in Cambodia, but the spectre of future allied moves into southern Laos suddenly became a live possibility in Hanoi's mind. Faced with the changed situation, the communists might have seen the long term picture in South Vietnam in decidedly bleaker hues. And if the communist situation in South Vietnam was less favorable and likely to suffer further deterioration, Hanoi might feel compelled to attempt a dramatic move to reverse the adverse trends, even if it meant taking major risks.

11. There are other military considerations involved. The Cambodian Army is growing in size and probably will grow in effectiveness. At least, Hanoi cannot assume that it will not do so. A hard blow might set back this process, perhaps for all time; a decisive blow could remove the Cambodian Army as a factor in the Indochina situation, freeing communist forces for use in South

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Vietnam and easing the logistics situation along the South Vietnamese border. Furthermore, the relatively modest incremental requirements of a major military effort in Cambodia might appeal to Hanoi's policy makers. The balance of forces in Cambodia is considerably more favorable to the communists than that existing in South Vietnam. Thus Hanoi might not see the need for a massive infusion of new personnel.\* Not only would this be less of a strain on communist capabilities, but it might tend to reduce the adverse consequences should the move fail. Moreover, Hanoi might calculate that not having to resort to a massive buildup would enhance the surprise factor in a military offensive.

12. Finally, Hanoi might see a major effort to unseat the Lon Nol regime as contributing to the communist diplomatic

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\* The question of supplies is more difficult to answer. Based on recently acquired intelligence concerning the flow of communist supplies into Sihanoukville, it appears that as many, if not slightly more, arms were sent into Sihanoukville after Tet 1968 as before, though not all of these were actually delivered to the communists. This period of heavy supply flow coincides with the time when actual communist military activity was on the decline. The allied incursion into Cambodia did not unearth anything approaching the quantities involved. Thus, it is possible that the communists may still have substantial quantities of arms available in Cambodia. Weighing against this factor, however, is the disruption caused by the allied move into Cambodia. As a consequence, it seems likely that the communists may be faced with serious problems of positioning supplies and getting them to where they are needed; this problem would be even greater if the communists attempted to launch a major military effort.

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position. For some time, communist documents have been replete with specific, though not always consistent, references to the possibility of ceasefire. If Hanoi's leaders are thinking along such lines, they might consider it necessary to rack up a major military success before making a serious move in this direction.\* Indeed a common theme in communist documents is the necessity of "forcing" the US to accept a ceasefire on terms favorable to the communist position. But Hanoi must have some doubts as to how this can be accomplished so long as the allies hold the battlefield initiative. Thus, Hanoi might have decided that some dramatic move is necessary -- even if the moment is not the most propitious, communist forces are not perfectly prepared, and there is a risk of a postponement of US withdrawals.

13. Balance. We do not know what balance Hanoi strikes in weighing the disadvantages and advantages of a major effort to overturn the Lon Nol government. We would think that Hanoi would prefer to bring this about without a large-scale military push to occupy Phnom Penh, preferring to have the Lon Nol regime collapse as a result of communist pressure which led to his ouster by tractable Cambodian elements. This would tend to confuse international

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\* In this context, Madame Binh's 17 September "elaboration" in Paris of the communist negotiating position could be the opening gambit in a new round of the communist "talk-fight" strategy.

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perception of the political-diplomatic situation and, perhaps, in Hanoi's view, lessen the possibility of direct US intervention or a standdown in US withdrawals from South Vietnam. Thus, Hanoi might believe that its present steady but unspectacular pressures will do the job in time. But if Hanoi does indeed feel pressed for time and sees a need to do something dramatic to counter adverse trends in South Vietnam, more of the same would not seem to be enough.

## II. SOUTH VIETNAM AND LAOS

14. South Vietnam. In the wake of Cambodian developments, Hanoi has probably found itself even more strapped in South Vietnam than was the case in early 1970. The allied incursion into Cambodia has resulted in a marked diminution in communist military muscle in the southern half of South Vietnam. Recent evidence suggests that some communist forces have actually been withdrawn from the northern part of the country; and there is considerable evidence that throughout the country some communist units are being broken down into smaller operating elements and reassigned to lower echelons. At the same time, the cumulative toll of the war and the low rate of infiltration over the past year or so has resulted in a significant decline in overall communist strength. As a result, Hanoi would have to resort to substantially heavier infiltration into South Vietnam than we have

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yet seen merely to rebuild manpower strengths to the levels of a year ago. Moreover, as contrasted with the situation in Cambodia, the allied forces in South Vietnam are large and battle-ready.

15. On balance, therefore, we believe that anything like a major countrywide offensive in South Vietnam in the near future is not in the cards. The costs of just getting ready for such an effort appear exceedingly high, and the odds would appear to be against success for the communist side. Nonetheless, Hanoi may still feel the necessity of attempting some fairly vigorous action in South Vietnam, with the forces available, for political impact in the US and South Vietnam. This might involve a highly selective pattern of action, hitting only a few targets but attempting to hit them hard. The odds favoring such action would rise if the communists planned a major offensive elsewhere in Indochina.

16. Laos. Although the balance of forces in Laos is at least as favorable to the communists as that in Cambodia, there are several factors which appear likely to limit communist action in Laos. Communist successes would not have the impact on the situation in South Vietnam as would equivalent action in Cambodia. Moreover, Hanoi might not want to endanger the equilibrium in Laos -- which has served to give the communists control of the areas they need to prosecute the war in South Vietnam -- by inviting major allied ground action against the trail network in southern

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Laos. Also, the communists might not want to derail the ongoing negotiations in Laos by heavy military action. In any event, they appear to have scaled down their forces in the northern sectors while increasing them in the south -- i.e., those areas most closely related to the Cambodian and South Vietnamese theaters. Thus, although we anticipate stepped up communist activity in Laos, particularly in the south, we do not believe that such action will approach a concerted effort to overrun the country.

### III. CONCLUSION

17. Thus far we have little evidence that the communists are gearing up for major offensive actions other than those necessary to enlarge and secure lines of supply and base areas in southern Laos and northeastern Cambodia. Infiltration has picked up substantially in recent weeks, but it is too early to determine how extensive infiltration will be in the months ahead -- and the communists have a lot of ground to regain plus three combat theaters requiring men. The push down the trails this year, however, comes earlier and appears larger than in past years. The logistics push also appears likely to be more substantial this year; the communists have improved the network considerably. In addition, communist forces are being augmented in southern Laos, by infiltration from North Vietnam and by movement of personnel from northern South Vietnam. The presumption is that these forces

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are to operate in southern Laos, but some of them, as well as forces from South Vietnam, could also be diverted to Cambodia.

18. The points advanced above do not constitute an attempt to estimate that a major communist offensive to overthrow the Lon Nol government is likely in the near term. The "facts" presently available would not support such an estimate. At the same time, however, we do not think that the possibility should be ruled out (as some do), and we would place the odds of a major offensive in Cambodia in the vicinity of even. In any event, we believe that a case can be made that allied intervention in Cambodia may have increased the pressures on Hanoi to accept greater risks -- in military and/or political actions -- in efforts to improve their situation. If so, major activity in Cambodia, perhaps accompanied by stepped up -- but selective -- action in South Vietnam may seem the most feasible or worthwhile course to strategists in Hanoi. In sum, the pressures on Hanoi, real and psychological, to attempt decisive blows in Cambodia in hopes of generating a major shock to the allied side, or simply to clear the decks for future operations in South Vietnam, or even to set the stage for a diplomatic demarche, may be considerably greater than the evidence we have so far acquired would suggest.